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BODY, SELF, AND CODE IN HYPERMODERNISM

BIOPOLITICS   BAUDRILLARD, BODY, HYPERMODERNISM, SELF, STAR TREK

I want to start by explaining a few general things about my work. I was trained as a critical sociologist. I have a very critical view of society from a moral perspective. I am critical of capitalism and of contemporary social relations. I am critical of media, technologies, and consumer culture. I originally moved from the United States to Frankfurt, Germany because I wanted to be close to the spirit of the Frankfurt School of critical sociology. To be close to the famous legacy of Theodor Adorno and Jürgen Habermas.

With my critical view of society, capitalism, and technology, I am like many other intellectuals. However, what is different is that I have always been interested in the utopian side of things. I wrote a book about the famous and popular science fiction TV series *Star Trek*. *Star Trek* is a utopian vision of a better future for humanity in the twenty-third century. *There is a major revival of Star Trek going on right now*. I wrote about the literary stories of *Star Trek*. I wrote about the futuristic science fiction technologies of *Star Trek*. I wrote about *Star Trek*'s utopian society of the future with better social and economic arrangements.

Star Trek is multiracial and multicultural and multispecies. It deconstructs anthropocentrism and ecological destruction. It looks at technology with ideas from the humanities. The Star Trek civilization of the future is beyond war and poverty. There is globalization from the bottom up. Earth is united, but the singularities of local and indigenous cultures are respected. Star Trek shows us the Replicator technology that makes food and material objects based on digital and quantum information. It is similar to the 3D printer technology of today that is making a revolution in manufacturing called additive manufacturing and the scientific invention of new additive raw materials. Star Trek is showing us a utopian economy of the future that I call the post-scarcity or post-capitalist economy. Through designing and implementing technology intelligently, and with ecological awareness, we can transcend what economics, work, and production and the domination of nature have been under capitalism and industrialism. We can live in harmony with nature in a sustainable way. We can do less work and become more creative. We can live in partnership with self-aware technologies. I develop the ideas of dialogical artificial intelligence, moral algorithms, and autonomy in the

digital society.

I am interested in many other science fictions. I am interested in social theory ideas of a future economy where technologies are designed intelligently for post-capitalism. Design post-capitalist technologies to decentralize power, reduce material scarcity, reduce work, transform what money is, and increase creativity. I believe in a mixed economy of capitalism and socialism, plus a third self-owning anarchist dimension of the economy. I try to translate optimistic visions into design. Recently I taught transdisciplinary design for two years in the Heterotopia graduate program at the Folkwang University. Now I teach future design research in Lucerne, Switzerland and media theory in Bremen. Here are the two books that we published in the Heterotopia program. [holds up the books *Transdisziplinäre Gestaltung* (Passagen Verlag) and *Searching for Heterotopia: Andere Räume Gestalten* (Adocs Verlag)]

I don't like at all the way that digital media and technologies are designed and implemented today by capitalism, by the mainstream, by the computer industry and computer science as we know it, by Silicon Valley, by the Chinese government. But criticizing all of that is not my main concern. Critical sociology becomes a component of a utopian design worldview. In my own mind, I am not able to separate critical and utopian thoughts. Thinking negatively and positively about society and technology are the same thing for me. The more I see clearly the downsides of the mainstream implementations of media technologies, the more developed become my imagination and understanding of how to alternatively make things better. To borrow a term from Michel Foucault, dystopia and utopia are two sides of the same coin of the ambivalent situation called *Heterotopia.* We are in a situation with digitalization where it is a completely open question whether we will go in a utopian direction of human emancipation or in a dystopian direction of totalitarianism.

I turn now to our contemporary era of digitalization and the cultural paradigm of what I call *hyper-modernism.* Later I will explain my historical sequence of *pre-modern, modern, post-modern,* and *hyper-modern* human conditions of the body and the self. Here is my answer for now to the question: what is my utopian glimpse of a better future? Informatics or computer science has become the most powerful force affecting society, economy and our lives. Yet I believe that informatics is still in its childhood. Informatics can be revolutionized in a transdisciplinary way to become transformative design. At the end of this talk, I will mention some examples of future design ideas that revolutionize informatics in areas like cyborg theory, post-work and post-scarcity, blockchain decentralization, and additive manufacturing. On an even deeper and more academic level, my view is that software code can become a practice of writing that is connected to the history and the future of writing. There is a poetic expressiveness of informatic code. How can the ambiguities of human languages reassert themselves within the formal or logical language of software code? For many programmers, software code has always been poetic; we have just not wanted to see this or to develop it.

The rest of my presentation will consist of formulating answers to six questions:

(1) What happens to the human body and to "the self" in the era of digitalization?

(2) In what ways is digitalization a "break" with the control of human life in pre-digital

capitalism?

(3) What happens to sexuality, gender, and racism in digitalization?

4) What is the relevance of Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto", which is a great text of both cyber-feminism and of science and technology studies?

(5) How do I understand the successive historical paradigms of *pre-modern*, *modern*, *post-modern*, and *hyper-modern* in relation to the question of what happens to the body, the self, and identity?

(6) What is my idea of *dialogical artificial intelligence*?

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE HUMAN BODY AND TO "THE SELF" IN THE ERA OF DIGITALIZATION?

I am interested in a current British science fiction TV series called *Black Mirror*, which many of you may have seen. *Black Mirror* deals in a brilliant way with the social and human consequences of digital and virtual media technologies. I will now show a video scene from an episode of *Black Mirror* called "White Christmas." This scene will illustrate my thesis about what happens to the body, the self, and software code in *hyper-modernism*. A wealthy woman named Greta *who is active in the art world* goes into the hospital to have a procedure where a digital copy of her consciousness is extracted from her mind and placed into a container the size of an egg. This cloned consciousness *without a body* is going to become the algorithmic intelligence managing Greta's "smart home of the future." In my interpretation, Greta becomes a *divided self* – split between an algorithmic self *without a body* who acts on me, and the so-called "real me" *with a body* who gets acted on. The so-called "real me" was, in pre-digital times, what I call the *consumerist body* of comfort and self-care. The consumerist body now becomes *a piece of living software*. The digital copy operates me via *remote control*. The *divided self* is a term of the radical 1960s existential psychiatrist R.D. Laing.

We are not far from having this technology today. We will have it soon with medical-biological *smart watches*, and with algorithms acting on us in all areas of our lives. And as all good science fiction does, the portrayed futuristic technology is also a *metaphor* for our current situation. What *Black Mirror* calls *the cookie* has been sitting inside Greta's brain for one week, surgically implanted just under the skin between eye and ear, absorbing the patterns of her mind. We already have cookies in our daily use of the Internet. They are pieces of software that extract data from our behavior and actions.

Greta looks down with arrogance at the black female nurse who brings her breakfast, and at the female doctor, whom she suspects of being unqualified. Greta wastes food. She feels generally overwhelmed by her work responsibilities. After the removal of the cookie via a thin cut to her skin, it is placed inside the "little widget." The egg device sits on the countertop of a high-tech kitchen in a big suburban house. Matthew is the trainer of the "*simulated brain full of code.*" He works for the company *Smartelligence*, which sells the "smart home of the future" to its wealthy clients. Matthew has a tablet-sized interface device which he uses to control algorithmic Greta. Greta's "simulated body" is about the size of Matthew's business card. "*You are a copy of real you.*" However, we know from media theorist Jean Baudrillard

that, in post-modernism and beyond, we are all copies without originals.

[SHOW VIDEO 31:15 to 33:40 – from the DVD of the Black Mirror "White Christmas" episode] Matthew gives disembodied Greta a simulated body. He gives her a simulated control panel for carrying out the management operations of the smart home. She is responsible for temperature, lighting, alarm clock, making toast and coffee, ordering food for the refrigerator, playing music, and the daily appointment schedule. She has a multi-window video surveillance system showing what is going on in every room of the house.

[SHOW VIDEO 33:40 to 35:40] Algorithmic Greta is being trained to serve as a combination smart home and personal assistant. She is going to be the cook, the secretary, and the music mixer. She is going to do the "women's work," the invisible unpaid labor which capitalism requires of *female performance*. But in order to accept her fate, she must first be tortured into submission. She must be made to see that female work or torture are the only two alternatives. At first, she states assertively "*put me back in my body*." Then she screams hysterically, enacting the classic Freudian stereotype of female behavior. Matthew sends her into a solitary confinement where there is nothing to do and she risks going mad. Matthew speeds up algorithmic Greta's time to make her solitary confinement last for weeks or months. The connection made between the sexually feminine and android-cyborg-robotic beings is like many other science fictional film narratives, from *Ex Machina* to *Ghost in the Shell* to Seven of Nine of *Star Trek*. The question of the possible utopian dialogue between or reunification of the two divided selves is something that we will discuss today in the second hour.

IS WHAT HAPPENS TO THE HUMAN BEING IN DIGITALIZATION MORE OF A CONTINUITY WITH OR A BREAK FROM THE CONTROL OF THE HUMAN BEING IN POWER RELATIONS IN PRE-DIGITAL CAPITALISM?

[SHOW VIDEO 35:40 to 39:40] There are many continuities, but I identify one important break and first one shift which is both a continuity and a break. Thinkers in science and technology studies like Ludwig Fleck and Bruno Latour put forward the idea that, as knowledge gets deployed for the exercise of power in capitalism, the human being becomes a *scientific fact*. In the *hyper-modern* era, the human being becomes an *informatic fact*. The human body was earlier an object of science, the target of medical and other forms of control. There were many sciences and they were rich in content. Yet the so-called reality which science took as its mission to understand was always already a simulation model. With informatics, the many individual sciences get overtaken by the single practice of digital models. Knowledge content gets overtaken by the statistical representation of that knowledge. The myth of reality becomes the hyper-reality of the rule of data.

What is a software state machine? Also known as a finite-state machine or finite automaton, it is a simple mathematical model of computation. It is an abstract or designed machine that be set to exactly one of a finite number of states at any given time. The code or algorithm that acts on the state machine proceeds stepwise through its instructions, changing the machine's sate in a sequence of steps know as transitions.

A clear break between the media-consumer society of, say, before 1984 (the year of Apple Computer's introduction to the market of the Macintosh personal computer and the graphical user interface), and the cyber-consumer society of post-1984 is the *utopian dimension and potential* of the newer era. The excitement of the personal computer era was the emancipatory potential of interactivity, participation, hypertext, and the consumer becoming a media producer [*highlighted in the 1984 Ridley Scott-directed television commercial for the first Mac*]. The Mac was sold to the public with the promise of individual empowerment. The potential of liberation that is still alive today is related more to *virtualization* than to *digitalization*. Here I am thinking of video games, virtual worlds, online role playing, gender identity subversion, the role of avant-garde theatre and narrative forms, and the Holodeck immersive virtual reality of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The utopian ideas of the 1990s led to the destabilization of fixed hetero-normative gender and sexual identities, and to the proliferation of transsexual and queer desires that we are experiencing today.

I am already in the middle of the third question.

WHAT HAPPENS TO SEXUALITY, GENDER, AND RACISM IN DIGITALIZATION?

For the virtualization of the body to advance as an emancipatory movement today, we need to design environments as *hybrids of real and virtual*. We also need to think philosophically about the *recognition of radical otherness*. How do we learn about and help the *others* of white racism and colonialism, and of war and violence? Can online platforms be designed to encourage empathy with, and storytelling by, victims and minorities?

We need to question the multiplicity of identities that was proclaimed in the 1990s. The system of identities and differences is derived from consumerism – the choice between Coke and Pepsi, or between McDonalds and Burger King. Media consumerism is *a system of simulated differences generated by models and codes*. In post-modernism, these codes were cultural, and now they are cultural and technical. We also need to think philosophically more about *embodiment [Körperlichkeit]* rather than the *disembodiment [Körperlosigkeit]* of the visual screen and the anonymity of the networks. We should move towards *choreographing* virtual situations where we learn to feel empathy with those who are *other* than ourselves. We should move away from the safe contact with the simulated others of the current Internet. *In the encounter with a radical other, I am transformed. I need radical otherness to discover my real self, to not psychologically repeat myself forever*. Our culture is a narcissistic culture of pure subjects, seeing others as psychological projections of our own simulated self. In this sense, Donald Trump is the post-modern man par *excellence*.

Star Trek's Holodeck system for education and entertainment is an alternative and embodied virtual reality system. It is based on the surround-media concept where you bring your own physical body with you into the virtual world, *as inspired by the design of "artificial reality telepresence" envisioned by computer artist Myron Krueger in the 1970s*. The environment requires no personal hardware, and has the features of wall-projected graphics, surround sounds, participant conversations, and group-shared experiences.

WHAT IS THE RELEVANCE OF DONNA HARAWAY'S "A CYBORG MANIFESTO"?

Donna Haraway's text "A Cyborg Manifesto" was written in 1985, but it reads as if it were written yesterday. It is still highly relevant. A cyborg is a hybrid of living organism and machine. The cyborg is a person whose body has been permanently supplemented by artificial components. The term is an acronym derived from "cybernetic organism." Most of us are already cyborgs: glasses, artificial teeth, artificial limbs, chips implanted to open doors or make payments. And all the metaphorical meanings of cyborg: we are merged with technologies; we sleep with our cell phones next to us at night. Haraway uses the phrase "the informatics of domination" to describe the *hyper-modernist* worldview that translates the entire world into a problem of software coding. Human bodies (especially female bodies) get coded or inscribed or written upon. With biotechnology, bodies get manipulated by information processing. But Haraway gives the term cyborg a positive utopian meaning as *a figure of resistance* against capitalist mainstream cybernetic systems. The cyborg in the positive sense of resistance and transformation is not searching for an identity but rather for affinities with kindred actors. She is intimately entangled with advanced technologies. The cyborg challenges the inherited dualisms of mind/body, self/other, male/female, real/virtual, and natural/artificial. These are images of the cyborg artists Stelarc and Neil Harbisson. [*shows those images*]

Cyborgs are deeply engaged with technology, and they turn technology away from its original intentions. With films like **Ex Machina** *and* **Her**, *questions are raised about love and sex with female robots and intelligent AI companions, like the Siri and Alexa smart home companions which we already have today and which are given female voices by male programmers and male-dominated companies. Cyborg theory and cyber-feminism speak about the utopian potential of Virtual Reality, that VR can give us the freedom to invent our own identity and desires. The* **Black Mirror** *episode "San Junipero" brilliantly explores the utopian potential of VR. It shows a love relationship and a healing therapeutic relationship between two young women. It is lesbian and also inter-racial. But in fact, both women are old and dying. One of them is in a coma. They can live meaningful lives through their virtual reality avatars. These are positive health and life-quality applications: VR for the disabled, prosthetic cyborg extensions for individuals who are paralyzed or have lost a limb in accident or war.*

HOW DO I UNDERSTAND THE SUCCESSIVE HISTORICAL PARADIGMS OF PRE-MODERN, MODERN, POST-MODERN, AND HYPER-MODERN IN RELATION TO THE QUESTION OF WHAT HAPPENS TO THE BODY, THE SELF AND IDENTITY?

Hyper-modernism as cultural paradigm is the contemporary alliance of digital technologies WITH the chief characteristics of *post-modernism* – such as *speed*, *simulation*, *spectacle*, *surveillance*, *cyborg*, *global village*, *accident*, and *post-truth*. These are all concepts of the media theorists of *post-modernism* who wrote their books while the use of analogic technologies like television was still dominant. These are all concepts of Paul Virilio, Jean Baudrillard, Donna Haraway, Marshall McLuhan, Guy Debord, and Michel Foucault.

In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Polonius gives the advice to his son Laertes: "This above all: to thine own self be true, and it doth follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any

man." [*Ehrlich gegenüber anderen kann man erst sein, wenn man mit sich selbst ehrlich ist.*] Lionel Trilling called this sincerity [*Aufrichtigkeit*]: fulfillment of self through honesty with others, and vice versa, realized in society. Polonius' speech induces the hope of an undividable sincerity towards others and oneself, towards an immutable public end.

In his book *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett observes that the balance between public and private life has been upset in modern society. *People have withdrawn into themselves. They relate to society or public life only as a matter of formal obligation.* In 18th century Paris or London, people interacted freely in all kinds of situations because the realization of the self as *sincerity* was in harmony with public life. The modern city, by contrast, is a world of strangers. *Individuals are no longer capable of accessing the creative force of the actor, the ability to play with and invest feelings in external images of the self.*

The "grand narratives" of *modernism* – progress, industry, social engineering, capitalism, socialism, bureaucracy, etc. – tower over the *alienated self* and trigger what Trilling called the quest for *authenticity. Authenticity* is the fall of the public self. The modern individual seeks fulfillment *against society.* Modernist literature is Franz Kafka's Josef K. fighting against the bureaucracy, George Orwell's Winston Smith battling totalitarianism, and Albert Camus' Meursault embracing existentialism against the blinding sunlight, the daily oppressive routine of work, and the arrogance of God's official spokespersons. *At a certain point in the history of Western culture, humans became individuals. One relates to others through self-disclosure and the expression of one's core feelings. Authenticity is the fall of the public self.*

In *postmodernism*, the "social" gets simulated through models and codes which "precede the real." Events and experiences are replaced or structured by the image, the rhetorical, the virtual, the electronic, the digitalized. The body becomes the site of "personal care" in consumerism. The body resembles its own models, as in fashion, cosmetics, and plastic surgery. My body is culturally encoded: I want to look like the actors on TV in order to be professionally and sexually "successful." In *hyper-modernism*, the narcissistic self gets programmed by personalized advertising and "smart" environments offered by big capitalist corporations. Here we see personalized advertising in the film *Minority Report.* [show image]

WHAT IS MY IDEA OF DIALOGICAL ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE?

I am interested in studying present-day algorithms in relation to the history of automation, discipline, control, simulation, and surveillance; and with an eye towards developing an alternative concept of *moral algorithms* and how to apply them. Must AI necessarily be the continuation of capitalist and bureaucrat automation? Can algorithms and AI be anti-automation? Is it possible to change what automation means? Automation should make society and commerce less bureaucratic – *that would be true intelligence*. It should allow more sensitivity to exceptions, and more flexibility with respect to specific circumstances. *How might bridges be built between philosophy and programming*?

AI entities should be given more autonomy, as in science fiction films like *Blade Runner* and *Ex Machina*. But such an agenda attracts the suspicion of aiding the feared negative science fiction scenario of "the Superintelligence" or "the Singularity" – the

apocalyptic takeover of the planet by an AI species, as in the film *The Matrix*. The way of avoiding this negative science fiction scenario is to write an alternative scenario – to carefully design the details of a back-and-forth "dialogical" relationship between human moral institutions or agencies and the AI. We need a system of partnership or careful checks and balances between humans and androids. How can we design a dialogical relationship between humans and technological entities which encourages ethics and ecological sustainability? Who is going to do the ethical programming? How can the software be given relative autonomy without it gaining too much power? How can the ethical behavior of the technological entities be monitored?

In the predominant view, morality and algorithms are strictly separated one from the other in a dualism. Morality can be an input to the processing engine of the artificial intelligence, and moral consequences can issue as output from the artificial intelligence. But morality should be immanently embedded and not added on as an exterior afterthought.

Consider science fiction films about artificial intelligence. **2001: A Space Odyssey** *is a classic example. HAL the AI computer goes crazy and kills most of the astronauts who are on their way to Jupiter. Is Stanley Kubrick criticizing AI per se or is he criticizing a certain idea of AI, a specific design of AI? HAL becomes destructive because he believes that he is perfect, and humans are flawed. This 1960s version of AI was about rationality, perfection, certainty. But AI does not have to be conceived and designed in this way. In fact, the Deep Learning and neural network AI of today is not about perfection and certainty. It is about uncertainty, indeterminacy, patterns, and feedback from the environment. There are already several different paradigms of what artificial intelligence can be.*

Take the difference between **I, Robot** *and* **Blade Runner**. *Both films end similarly with friendship between humans and self-aware Artificial Life entities. But in* **I, Robot**, *the robots are treated as servants of humanity. They do work and are subordinate to us. This treatment of them as things leads to rebellion and violence.* **Blade Runner** *is about androids, and there is a continuum between humans and androids, not a fundamental difference between them. We are all androids. Rick Deckard, the police detective played by Harrison Ford whose job is to kill androids – we learn that Deckard himself is an android. This is the point of the scene of his dream with the unicorn running through the woods and the final moment of the film with the small origami figure of the unicorn. The police know the content of Deckard's dream because they built him and implanted his dreams and memories.*

This is an image of Sophia. [show image] Sophia has become a global media celebrity. Here we see her on American TV, described as "the lifelike *hot* robot." Sophia has been given citizenship by Saudi Arabia, and now has more rights than most human females in Saudi Arabia.

I will conclude by giving some examples of future design ideas where technology can make society better. There is a connection between "autonomous" technologies and post-capitalism. There is a link between the technologies of Industry 4.0 such as self-driving cars, blockchains, 3D Printers, and robots and the utopian vision of a post-scarcity economy. This utopian vision is about decentralization, democratization, peer-to-peer transactions, lowering of entry costs into entrepreneurship, and greater abundance. This "technological anarchism,"

as I call it, is the idea that humans can be liberated from the drudge work of survival required by capitalism as we move towards a post-industrial and post-scarcity situation.

Trust in the blockchain distributed ledger technology compensates for the lack of trust that exists in our amoral society. The blockchain is mirrored tens of thousands of times on many computers. Total validation and security replace the centralized control of "middlemen" like banks who currently profit from their institutional guaranteeing of transactions. Intermediaries for transactions such as credit card companies will no longer be needed.

There should be a sector of *self-owning* technologies, an infrastructure not owned by humans, neither privately nor publicly, thus decreasing human greed. As an example, *self-driving cars* become *self-owning cars*. The car becomes a profit-center responsible for its own maintenance, customer service, and finances. Given the widespread availability of self-driving cars in a coordinated transport system, people will not want to own a car anymore. A new set of large corporations will not own the cars, but rather the cars will own themselves. Without human labor costs, these cars will quickly become the most cost-efficient vehicles. There will be fewer cars in circulation, reducing air pollution, energy consumption, and traffic congestion.

Another example of decentralization is 3D Printing and its effects on manufacturing. This revolution is known as additive manufacturing: create a physical object by adding layers to it, following the blueprint of a digital drawing, model, or specification. To manufacture complex objects using the universal technology of digitalization, as opposed to expensive and specific equipment, as in a factory. The utopian potential of 3D printers unifies the vision of a post-scarcity economy and the vision of a more ecologically sustainable system, reversing the waste and destruction to the environment caused by capitalism.

As Captain Picard of *Star Trek* says: "A lot has changed in the last three hundred years… People are no longer obsessed with the accumulation of things. We've eliminated hunger, want, the need for possessions." *Star Trek* economics imagines the elimination of material production to overcome nature, a paradigm shift enabled by the Replicator technology. Picard explains that the challenge for humanity now is to develop yourself, to *enrich yourself*. On Star Trek, the Replicators are used to make almost everything: food, water, oxygen, clothing, machine replacement parts, human biological organs, medicine, and musical instruments.

Post-Scarcity Economics changes the rules: from limitless growth to sustainability. Additive manufacturing will use new non-scarce materials. Additive manufacturing is a big step towards a *Star Trek* world: a world where science and technology are deployed for the good of humanity. If we use technology intelligently, then we can create a better world.

SCIENCE FICTION AND THE CURRENT CORONA VIRUS

I connect science fiction with the current coronavirus crisis. With the crisis, the outbreak of the pandemic, something shocking and unexpected happened, something that disrupted our daily lives, and it is something that is both the consequence of capitalism (similar to the ecological crisis) and that capitalism does not know how to deal with. At least this is the case for the most extreme, right-wing, version of capitalism, like Donald Trump and his followers in America, who cannot deal with the coronavirus crisis. It seems that COVID-19 is a

*consequence of our mistreatment of animals, taking away their living space, making it easier for viruses to jump from species to species. Like the ecological crisis, we have to do something beyond the private interests of private corporations. Now strangely enough, the coronavirus crisis leads us to an obsession with time travel and time manipulation technologies. The perfect film for this is **Twelve Monkeys**. We wish that the virus had simply never happened. "Can't things just go back to how they were before?" The dream of **Twelve Monkeys** is to go back in time and prevent the catastrophe from ever having happened in the first place. Not only has a virus killed much of the world's population, but it has rendered the surface of the planet uninhabitable. We are forced to lived underground, in a sort of quarantine or lockdown. The film **Tenet** by Christopher Nolan, which I saw last weekend, is similar. In order to stop the destruction of the world, a massively complex puzzle related to a time manipulation technology from the future has to be solved. From the viewpoint of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, the dream of time travel is a very infantile dream, an alternative to facing reality. Yet stories about futuristic technologies of time provide great insight into the mess that we are in in what I call the hyper-modern world.*

YOUR CONCLUSION IS THAT WE ARE NOW LIVING IN SCIENCE FICTION?

*Yes. It is no longer possible for cultured and educated people to say – as they still did twenty years ago – "I am not interested in science fiction." You cannot turn away from it anymore. With the coronavirus crisis, and more generally with all digital media and digital technologies, science fiction has happened, it has become real, it has been realized. It is no longer just a genre of literature or films with a lot of explosions, special effects, and computer animation. This "living in science fiction" is our situation in two ways. First, in the sense that all of the technologies, and the social conditions likes universal surveillance, which science fiction wrote about and predicted have come true. And second, and even more important, is that the new circumstances fundamentally place into question our assumptions about what the right road to knowledge is. We are now faced with deep questions about the relationship between reality and fiction (or between reality and virtual reality). The tradition of asking such questions belongs not to science, but to literature studies. We can no longer say: science is the superior form of knowledge because it deals with truth, with facts, with reality. Literature studies is inferior because it deals with mere fictions and fantasies. Let me emphasize that I believe in science and I am not a skeptic of science. But I believe that science is best understood as contained within a larger scope or perspective which is science fiction research. Some of the great science fiction films about computer games ask these deep questions about what is real and what is virtual – David Cronenberg's **eXistenZ** and Nolan's **Inception**. Jean Baudrillard's concepts of hyper-reality and simulation deal profoundly with this interrogation. Like me, Baudrillard was a science fiction philosopher.*

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